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Big Sun

The Legend made of Iron Lives on in Cooter Pond

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INVERNESS — Like the "Nessie" in the Loch in Scotland and the Lake Champlain lizard, Inverness has its own denizen of the deep, and it also is shrouded in myth and legend.

The creature rests comfortably on the bottom of Cooter Pond in the heart of Inverness. Only one man has seen it so far, but many old-timers have attested to the legend.

It's lair is guarded by a sizeable alligator, according to one man, who said his grandfather remembers the big splash in the early 1930s when the leviathan at the bottom of Cooter Pond came to be.

The creature is not of the flesh, but of the iron, for below the murky depths of Cooter Pond rests three — some say four — Seaboard Coast Line freight cars, derailed before records at the railroad's Jacksonville office would care to indicate.

Myth has it the cars derailed in the 1930s, dumping a flatcar, and a couple of boxcars into the tea-tinted water.

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Probably the only creature swirling water around the metal axles and wheels is "One-Eyed Joe" a large alligator living in the pond — or so says Albert Johnson, 52, of Inverness.

He remembers his granddaddy telling him of the railroad cars under the surface of Cooter Pond. "And why would he lie to me?" he asks.

Johnson's granddaddy told him when the train derailed, many town residents lined the banks and dove in hoping to salvage the canned hams and women's apparel loaded into the cars.

But that's before "One-Eyed Joe" sniffed the hams, Johnson said. When the infamous gator moved into the pond, the swimmers and treasure hunters moved out and left the booty for the determined reptile.

"My granddaddy told me the train derailed down there and they say it's been there for years," confirms Johnson, puffing on an unlit fat cigar.

"I used to walk those tracks to go to school," says the lifelong Inverness resident, adding, "It's true there is a train down there, people have told me that all my life."



But tell that to Owen Pride, spokesman for the Seaboard Coast Line Railway, now known as the Seaboard System Railroad.

Pride, speaking from his Jacksonville office said the company has no records of any derailment, but those records only go back so far.

He has had to contact old railroad retirees in an attempt to find out about the legend.

So far, he said, he has found out there hasn't been a derailment at Cooter Pond since 1942. But there could have been one before then, he said.

"I've been working on this for two or three days, talking with people who may recollect the incident," Pride said.

"No one in our employ or recently retired remembers," he added.

But, he continued, "the general consensus is that it happened in the early 1930s." Pride went on to say in those days, the Atlantic Coast Line operated along the tracks as well as the Seaboard Air Line Railroad.

In 1967 they merged, becoming the Seaboard Coast Line.

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Passers-by on U.S. 41 sometimes see him out in the pond — now called Sunset Lake by a developer planning to build a yacht club on the water — with metal detectors slung over the bow of his boat.

O'Hara, a retired electronics engineer, who dabbles in metal detectors as a hobby, said when the water was low half a year ago, he saw the axles and wheels of the submerged freight cars. But now that the water is higher, the brown-tinted pond has once again hidden its best kept secret. He says he has heard from several residents telling him the train sank in 1932.

"The cars were loaded with canned ham and women's clothes," O'Hara said several old timers have told him.

One old timer said he remembers the derailment, where several freight cars were dumped into the pond. The accident left the locomotive half on, half off the tracks.

"I knew something heavy was down there," O'Hara said of the first confrontation with the beast, although "there is (metal) stuff all over that place."

O'Hara, 61, who moved to Inverness about six years ago, said he will continue his hobby, but plans to do nothing but take note of his findings.

Meanwhile Pride said that although the box cars in the pond may be antiques, there are no plans afoot to bring the cars to the surface. It just wouldn't be worth it, he said.

"It would obviously not be worth the expense," he said. "I assume that's why it was left there at the time."

So the legend of Cooter Pond will live on.